MU

MAHENDR

'Need for perfectio

Think of Mahendra Kapoor and you instantly recall `Mere
kind of song, be it the romantic `Neele gagan ke tale
his name is synonymous with the frenzied patriotic song from
time and again, asserts the belief that only a robu
The veteran singer has been awarded with the Padmashree, the
awards. One more on the list is the Lata Mangeshkar award gi
and ever-smiling singer on the occasion an

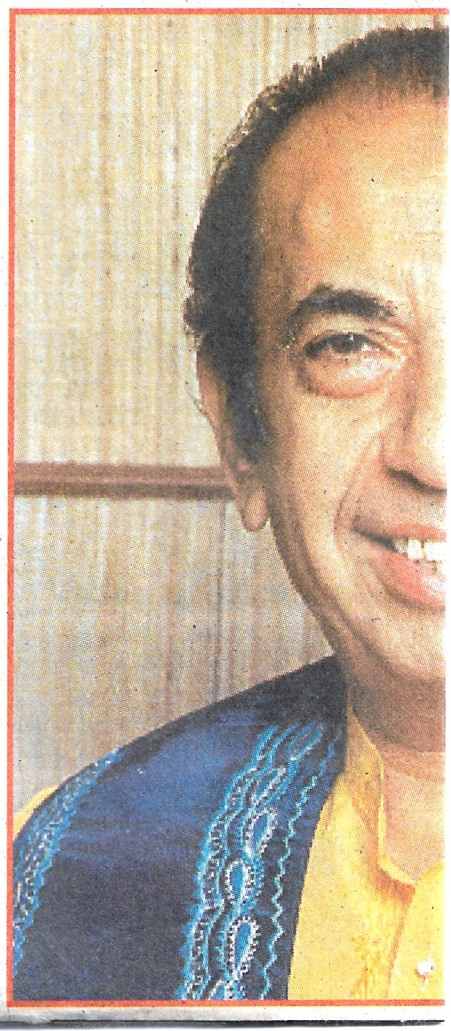
FOR a 65-year-old, Mahendra Kapoor looks quite fit and fine. Touch wood. His agility and alertness has you thinking twice before calling him a veteran. But after four decades on the music scene, that's the only noun most apt for the singer. His music room in a simple house, in the swank Bandra suburb in Mumbai is full with mememntoes and trophies, and photographs of himself and his son Ruhan (spelling changed for numerology). A picture of the legendary Mohammed Rafi stands out as being the only other singer's photo. "He was my *guru* and inspiration," Kapoor explains.

Dressed trendily in a violet shirt and black trousers, Kapoor cuts an endearing picture, smiling that crinkle-eyed smile of his throughout the interview. He lights up when he fondly talks about his grandson Siddhant, a very well-behaved and intelligent kid, whom he dotes on. Though not active on the playback scene, Kapoor is still widely heard thanks to the devotional albums he cuts in huge numbers. We begin the interview with the obvious question:

You have been chosen as this year's recepient of the Lata Mangeshkar award. Do awards and honours excite you?

Whenever an artiste is given an award, it definitely makes him feel on top of the world. The artiste feels his/her work is recognised. It's a kind of tonic. I still remember how honoured I had felt when I had bagged the first National award, right after it was instituted, for the which starred Pradeep Kumar. I knew composer Khayyam *Sahab* well, and he recommended me to Anil Biswas, who was on a lookout for a Punjabi *ladka* with a powerful voice to sing a *heer*. After I recorded the *heer*, Biswas*ji* was quite impressed.

Today playback singing means going to the studio and dubbing your part of the song. The music is already recorded, there's no live orchestration, there's nobody to interact. How does one get into the mood then?



When did you first sing professionally?

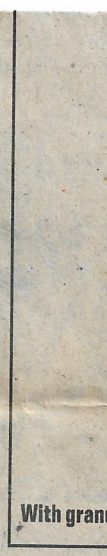
After I won the All India Metro Murphy Singing Competition. The judges for the competition were Naushad *Sahab*, C. Ramachandra, Madan Mohan, Anil Biswas and Vasant Desai. They were to choose one boy and one girl from the whole of India, and it was one of the toughest competitions with 10 elminition rounds. Those taking part had to have a strong classical foundation and be able sing any type of song. So imagine my joy when I was chosen as the winner.

The first song I recorded was with C. Ramachandra for V. Shantaram's *Navrang*. The song was *Aadha hai chandrama raat aadhi*. At the same time I recorded a song with Naushad *Sahab* for the film *Sohni Mahiwal*. The song *Chaand chhupa aur taare dube*, which was almost seven-minutes long, was very difficult for a beginner like me, and I could sing it well only because of Naushad *Sahab*'s efforts. *Chaand chhupa...* was released first, followed by *Aadha hai chandrama*.

Best Singer for *Mere desh ki dharti*. Later, I was awarded the Padmashree, which was another proud moment in my life. There have been many awards and titles I have got since, and each award helps in instilling the confidence in you that you are good.

The Rashtriya Lata Mangeshkar award presented by the MP government holds special significance because it is in the name of one of the great singers, who's my senior colleague, and who I have always looked up to. The presentation ceremony will be held in February 17, 2002, wherein I will be presneted with a citation and rupees one lakh.

With Manna Dey and son Ruhan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It's been 45 years now since you've been singing professionally. Are you satisfied with your achievements?

A human being is never satisfied. One always feels there's a lot more to do. The craving to learn is always there. That's the case with me too. I still feel I've got so much to learn and improve upon. Which is why I am still learning music from my *guru*, Pt. Murli Manohar Shuklaji. The three of us - that's me, my son Ruhan; and my grandson Siddhant - sit together to learn classical music, and it feels as if I am just beginning. Siddhant picks up things much faster than me (*Smiles*).

Yes, if you are asking about material things and fame, then I must count myself as being blessed by the Almighty.

How did you get initiated into a singing career?

Right from the the time I was in school till I went to college, I was regularly singing for all the school and college functions. Alongwith filmmaker Vijay Anand and Ameen Sayani, I was one of the founder members of the Sangeet Mandal in Xavier's College, which is now Malhar. I also acted in plays with them, though I knew that singing was what I would pursue.

Encouraged by my elder brother Brijmohan Kapoor, and my mother, who was a singer, though she never sang professionally, I was learning classical music under V. Balsara. And it was he who gave me my first chance to sing for a film, though as an amateur. I was in my 10th standard then, and the film was *Madmast*. Balsara made me sing a duet with the singer S.D. Baatish. Another film I sang was for *Lalkaar*, followed by *Diwali Ki Ek Raat*, in which Talat Mehmood was the hero. The song I sang was in the background and composed by Snehal Bhatkar. Another good song I sang as an amateur was for the film *Heer*

What was the response to your first song?

Oh, the response was so good that it established my career rightaway. I've been told that when the song was initially played on the radio, there would be bets on whether the song was sung by Mohd. Rafi. To be compared to Rafi *Sahab* in my first song itself was an honour. What better compliment could I ask for? To date people love to listen to *Chaand chhupa taare dube*. It's a beautiful song which tells the story of Sohni going to meet Mahiwal, crossing the river with the help of a *ghada* (pot).

You were said to be a great fan of Mohd. Rafi right from childhood.

Rafi *Sahab* has been my inspiration all along. He has been one of my *gurus*, and I started learning music from him when I was 11 years old.

We didn't know that Rafi *Sahab* taught music too!

No, Rafi *Sahab* didn't train anybody. I was the only lucky one to learn singing from him. Maybe it was because we came from the same place, Amritsar, which explains his affection for me. I still remember vividly how I had almost gate-crashed at his house. All my school friends knew that I was this huge fan of Rafi *Sahab* since I would always be singing his songs. One fine day a classmate said that he had discovered where Rafi *Sahab* lived, and gave me the address. He was living in Dongri at that time. Delighted at the thought of seeing my idol in flesh and blood, I just rushed to his house, and introduced myself, and blurted out that I wanted to learn music from him. Rafi *Sahab* and his elder brother Hamid were very affectionate, and asked me to get the permission of my parents before starting the lessons. My parents were more than happy, and our association grew into a strong bond. We became family friends. Rafi *Sahab* would regularly visit our house, and loved the Punjabi *lassi* my mother made. He would take me

'Lata*ji* instilled confidence in me'

"Lata*ji* and Asha*ji* are truly great artists. They were always frank in their opinion, and never underestimated their co-singer. Whenever either of them was singing a duet with me, they would always ask whether they were singing alright. And they would give me suggestions too, not to show their seniority or power, but to improve my singing style. I remember I was so nervous before the recording of my first duet with Lata*ji*, *Tere pyar ka aasra chahta hoon* from *Dhool Ka Phool*. But the moment she entered the recording room with a smile, I was put at ease. She said you are my *chhote bhaiya* and never made me feel like a newcomer. She instilled confidence in me saying I was good."

SIC

A KAPOOR

n is lacking today'

esh ki dharti...' *Even though the singer has sung almost every ...', the* ghazals *in* Nikaah, *or* qawwalis *and* bhajans, Upkaar, *composed by Kalyanji-Anandji. Listening to the song st voice like Kapoor's could have done justice to it. National Award, besides the various state awards, and popular ven by the Madhya Pradesh government.* Screen *met the humble d re-lived with him his cherished moments...*

who then took me to sing for *Dhool Ka Phool*. The song *Tere pyar ka aasra chahta hoon* was my first duet with Lataji (Mangeshkar), composed by N. Datta. After that I established a lasting relationship with both B.R. Chopra and Yash Chopra. B.R. Chopra still asks me to sing for all his productions, even the title songs of his teleserials *Mahabharat* and *Vishnupuran*.

Since composer Ravi was also a regular with B.R. Chopra, I struck a good rapport with him, and together we have given most hits. Songs like *Na mooh chhupake jiyo, Chalo ek baar phir se ajnabi ban jaaye hum dono, Neele gagan ke tale* helped me in establishing my identity.

Though all these romantic songs were hits, you really got a fillip with your patriotic song *Mere desh ki dharti* for *Upkaar*, right?

Mere desh ki dharti was a very powerful song which charges up every Indian even today. That song did give me a new identity altogether, after which I got a lot of patriotic songs to sing.

I remember the stormy night when we had recorded that song. Manoj Kumar, Kalyanji-Anandji, lyricist Gulshan Bawra and I had reached the Famous Recording Studio in Tardeo, at three in the evening. I had already rehearsed the song more working. The last film I sang for was Dharmendra's *Dillagi*, directed by Sunny Deol. Today playback singing means going to the studio and dubbing your part of the song. The music is already recorded, there's no live orchestration, there's nobody to interact. How does one get into the mood then? The live atmosphere earlier would charge you up, and you felt like giving your best. Though I agree that one has to change with the times, I can't adjust to the present way of working. There are a few directors though who still record in the old style, like B.R. Chopra, Yash Chopra, and Karan Johar, and I do sing for B.R. Chopra.

I prefer keeping myself busy with non-film albums, most of which are devotional in nature. My new Punjabi album is due for release.

You also do a lot of shows.

Yes, shows give me a high even at this age. And I get plenty of requests for stage shows. I have just come back after performing in the US. I usually sing for four hours at a stretch at my shows, and the reaction of live audience makes you feel good. It's heartening when they demand a particular song or ask for an encore. My son Ruhan loves performing at the shows and you should see how enthusiastic he is. Asians in America recently honoured me with a Lifetime Achievement award and while receiving the award, I got a standing ovation. What more can I ask? *Maalik* has given me everything.

When the song `*Chaand chhupa aur taare dube...*' was initially played on the radio, there would be bets on whether the song was sung by Mohd. Rafi. What better compliment could I ask for?

Siddhant

With Kalyanji, Lata Mangeshkar, Saira Banu, Dilip Kumar and Anandji

'Naushad *Sahab* said '*Meri izzat rakh lena*'

"Around the same time as *Aadha hai chandrama*, I recorded the song *Chand chhupa aur taare dube* with Naushad *Sahab*. It was a high-pitched song, where the voice had to really take off, and Naushad *Sahab* was worried whether a complete newcomer like me would be able to deliver the goods. He had booked the Mehboob Recording Studio for the whole day. And for days before the recording, he had rehearsed with me thoroughly at his house. Just before the final recording he said, "*Meri izzat rakh lena*. (Keep my faith)." That's when I realised how humble such a famous man was, and I gave the song my best shot.

"I respect all my composers, but Naushad *Sahab*'s speciality was that he always explained things lovingly. He'd take pains to explain how he wanted the song to be sung, how to stress on words and what emotions to convey. And above all, he respected the artiste."

alongwith him for recordings, which is how I picked up the nuances of playback singing even while I was an amateur.

Who are the others who have contributed to your singing career?

Besides Rafi *Sahab* and Naushad *Sahab*, who really honed my singing talent, there was Madan Mohan, who made me realise the importance of classical music. He gave me some beautiful songs, like *Chhod ke tere pyar ka daaman*, and even the comic *Sikander ne Porus se ki thi ladayi*. Khayyam *Sahab* was a major guiding factor in my life, who literally held my hand and taught me the finer nuances of singing. Then there were my *gurus* Ustad Niyaz Ahmed Khan, Ustad Abdul Rahman Khan, Pt. Husnlalji (of Husnlal-Bhagatram duo) and Pt. Jagannath. It was thanks to these great teachers that I came into the field of playback singing well-prepared, and could sing alongwith mighty singers like Rafi, Mukesh, Kishore Kumar, Talat Mehmood. Thanks to them, I could stand the competition, though it was healthy competition.

After *Aadha hai*... and *Chand chhupa*..., which were the other songs with which you contended your position?

Recordist Kaushik recommended me to Yash Chopra, than five times before entering the recording room. We recorded the song after 22 takes. By the time we finished, it was five in the morning. We didn't even realise that there was a storm outside, and when we came out of the studios, there was flooding on the streets and water had reached the window-level of our cars.

The song clicked in a big way, and after that I was a regular in all Manoj Kumar films. My other big hit with him was the *Purab Aur Paschim* song, *Hai preet jahan ke reet sada*.

Besides Sunil Dutt and Manoj Kumar, which are the other actors you have sung for?

I have sung for Dilip Kumar. I enjoyed singing *Gentleman, gentleman* for him in *Gopi*. Dilip *Sahab* would always be present at the recordings and would act out the song during the rehearsals. *Bairaag, Shakti, Mazdoor, Mashaal* and *Kalinga* are the other films of Dilip *Sahab* with my playback. I sang for Jeetendra in the early phase of his career for films like *Geet Gaya Pattharon Ne*, and even later in *Nagin* (*Tere sang pyar mein*). I have sung for Vinod Khanna, Dharmendra, Amitabh Bachchan (in *Saat Hindustani* and *Ek Nazar*), Rajesh Khanna, Rishi Kapoor, and almost all songs for Raj Babbar.

And you were Dada Kondke's voice too. Didn't you feel awkward singing his *double entendre* songs?

Not at all. Because I didn't look at them that way. For me they were songs sung by a village bumpkin, and I put the emotion of naivete into them. It was fun singing for him. Like Dilip Kumar, Dada too would act out the songs during recording, which helped convey the right emotions. I started singing for him from his second film *Ram Ram Gangaram* onwards, till the end.

One hardly hears you singing for films now, though you are quite prolific with non-film albums.

I have almost stopped playback singing because I don't really like today's style of

'Had it not been for Asha*ji*, I would never have made it as a singer'

"In a way, I owe my career to Asha*ji* (Bhosle). The first professional song I recorded was *Aadha hai chandrama* with Asha*ji*. And Anna (that's composer C. Ramachandra), had almost cancelled the song after the recording. Anna told Asha*ji* that the new singer (that was me) seemed nervous and hadn't sung the song well. But Asha*ji* insisted that I had done a good job. After a lot of deliberation, they discovered that there was some problem with the recording instruments, and when they rectified it, they discovered that my singing was upto the mark. Asha*ji* saved me at that time, and had it not been for her, I would have been rejected right after my first song."

Do you like today's musi

Yes, films like *Lagaan* *Gadar* have good music. There should be freshne music and subject, whic seen in these films. I am for Indian music, which more emotional and bas on melody. Not that I ha Western music, it has its colour. When I go for my shows in America, the younger generation wan listen to old songs. The melodies had sustainin power because dedicatio devotion and hard work put into them.

How would you compare the present and past music scene?

The need for perfection is lacking today. It's the *cha hai* attitude. After more than 40 years in singing, I am fident that I can sing any type of song. But *abhi bhi da rehta hai*. That fear is always there whether the musi director, or the producer, or director, will like the way have sung the song.

Today just about anybody can become a singer. Ea music directors would test you to see if you knew you music well, and only then give you a chance to sing. A today there is too much of dirty politics on the scene.

Your son Ruhan didn't exactly follow in your footste and opted for an acting career. Don't you think if he started out as a singer, he would have been establishe the playback scene today?

Maybe. But whatever happens, happens for the bes Ruhan has always been learning classical music and has got his own singing style. He cut an album *Ishq R Dua* sometime back, and he has also started playbac singing. He recently recorded a duet with Richa Shar for composer Surinder Kohli.

Do you want your grandson Siddhant to take up sing too?

I don't want to force things on him. He is bright in s ies, and always stands first. But he is inclined toward music. He is learning classical music with me and Ru since I believe any kind knowledge stands in go stead. When he was six, came home with a prize which he had won after singing *Mere desh ki dh* a competition in school were all pleasantly surp (*Smiles proudly*).

In the end, what's your in life?

What you are doing to counts. Resting on past rels doesn't help.

SALMA
salmakhatib@hotma